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MYSTICISM IN WAR

BY ELSIE CLEWS PARSONS

TO some of us not least among the pungencies, or if you prefer exasperations, of the European war is the spectacle of its leaders appealing to the gods,¹ or rendering them thanks for the victories put down to their credit. The Czar holds up the sacred *ikon* to be gazed upon by his kneeling, worshipful troops. The Kaiser makes speeches and issues proclamations about the motives and purposes of the God of the Fatherland and of his royal house. Even the British recruit is asked to enter into partnership with God.

But Czar and Kaiser are only true to their kingly parts. As for the British recruit, his cooperation might be considered an instance of delegated sovereignty. But all of his sacerdotal sovereignty the English King has not delegated to his subjects. Some of his sacred war functions George IV himself retains. Has he not vowed not to touch a drop of liquor during the war? A vow is of course a religious act. We recall at once in this connection the vow and sacrifice of Jephtha, the leader of the Hebrew army, and we recall the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her royal father.

Agamemnon in this instance performed a very special act of sacrifice—the circumstances were so contrary—but it was the usual thing for a Greek king whenever he set out on a campaign to sacrifice to deity. Fire from the altar of Zeus was carried in the vanguard of the Spartan army until the army reached the frontier. There the King sacrificed again.

In cultures even more primitive than ours or than the Greek the supernatural rôle of chieftancy in time of war may also be seen. Among the Melanesian tribes of New Guinea there are certain chiefs whose principal function is making war magic. The *paiha* chief of the Roro-speaking tribes carries charms of leaves and bark and pieces of broken weapons into battle, and before the warriors set out he doctors them. Approaching a hostile village, the Mekeo *faia* chief spits on a plant called *ofe* and with it in his hand delivers in the air an overhand blow, striking downward in the direction of the enemy's village. He passes the plant under his right leg and again strikes downward, murmuring spells the while to cause the enemy to sleep heavily. Just before reaching the village he crouches on the ground, blocking his ears with his fingers to

¹ I use the plural advisedly—the deity whose building is bombarded can hardly be the same whose aid is invoked to destroy it.

induce deafness in the enemy. Then, as the rush is made, each warrior jumps over the crouching *faia* chief.²

Not only are some of the methods of war magical, not only are war leaders the magicians *par excellence* of their people, the heads of the church; but the very motives and impulses of war arise in part from the same kind of association with which magic is likewise concerned, at least, what is called sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic is due to a sense of participation. Things that have been in contact affect each other both during and after the contact, and like affects like, these are the two leading principles of sympathetic magic. It is an analogous principle of association, an analogous sense of participation which prompts the family vendetta, the tribal feud, the wars of hamlets or hordes and, may I add, the wars of nations or races. The individual's sense of participation in his group, in his family, tribe or nation, is disturbed when any other fraction of the group is disturbed. He himself feels injured when the group in any part suffers injury. He therefore proceeds to protect his nation, his people, his home, *i. e.*, himself by retaliation upon the injurious group or *any part of it*. This "family feeling" or *esprit de corps*, this sense of patriotism, is a purely subjective feeling, and, like all such feelings, it is unconcerned by logical contradictions, it is untested by objective reality—it is, in short, highly mystical.

What is the difference between this kind of mysticism and mysticism ordinarily speaking, between uncritical group feeling and piety? Piety too is non-logical, subjective, craving union, but the union it desires is not with humans, its sense of participation is with deity; so long as that sense is intact, piety is unconcerned about human relations. Piety is unconcerned about human relations in themselves, but, as the sense of union with deity is immensely strengthened by the sense of common worship, the pious are in fact concerned about the body of the faithful. What that body is to consist of is a matter of circumstance. Consider Christianity. Owing to the circumstances of its genesis, Christianity was dissociated from social groups. It was adrift, so to speak, in society. It was lonely. It developed the dogma of the brotherhood of man, quite as mystical a dogma as nationality or any other principle of kinship. But, after two or three centuries, when Christianity was adopted as a state religion, the Christian's gregarious instinct was satisfied in another way; his sense of participation with mankind became superfluous; it began to atrophy. One with his church-state, the Christian rose up against heretic and pagan, his pristine brethren. Warfare with the enemies of the Christian Church but intensified his sense of participation with the Father of Mankind. The Crusades and the In-

² May I suggest that the stimulus given before a charge by magic corresponds to the encouraging shibboleth words of a commander in modern war or to the "dope" allotted, according to Jane Addams and Gilbert Murray, before a cruel bayonet charge?

quisition gave Christians a full measure of the sense of union with God, probably the fullest measure they were collectively to have.

For then, in course of time, came the movement historians call nationalism, a movement which subordinated church to state, the faithful to the patriotic, a movement which made of God at most a national hero. To illustrate this subservience of the godhead I can not do better than cite the colloquy between Shatov and Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's novel, "The Dispossessed," and let me cite it at length, for not only does it illustrate the rôle of the gods in nationality, it expresses extremely well that more fundamental mysticism of nationality which, we hold, is the source of international war. Shatov is speaking:

"Nations are built up and moved by another force [a force other than science and reason] which sways and dominates them, the origin of which is unknown and inexplicable: that force is the force of an insatiable desire to go on to the end, though at the same time it denies that end. *It is the force of the persistent assertion of one's own experience,*³ and a denial of death . . . the seeking of God, as I call it. . . . The object of every national movement in every people and at every period of its existence is only the seeking for its god, who must be its own god, and the faith in Him as the only true god. God is the synthetic personality of the whole people, taken from its beginning to its end." . . . "You reduce God to a simple attribute of nationality," exclaims Stavrogin. "I reduce God to the attribute of nationality?" cries Shatov. "On the contrary, I raise the people to God. And has it ever been otherwise? The people is the body of God. Every people is only a people so long as it has its own god and excludes all other gods on earth irreconcilably. . . . If a great people does not believe that the truth is only to be found in itself alone (in itself alone and exclusively); if it does not believe that it alone is fit and destined to raise up and save all the rest by its truth, it would at once sink into being—not a great people.

A striking portrait, is it not, of the patriotic Christian, the Christian national?

But why is it, I may be asked, that despite Christianity's subjection to nationalism, despite its own peculiarly bloody history, there has persisted in Christendom a belief in the sanctity of human life, a conviction potent enough at times to make for large bodies of heretics like the Lollards, the Anabaptists, or the Quakers, a conviction that is even today a thorn in the flesh of the unmitigated militarist nationalist?

This outcropping conviction, this stubborn feeling, the Christian pacifist likes to date back to the early years of Christianity; but it is, I suspect, pre-Christian, nay prehistoric. It is akin, I suggest, to the horror of blood pollution felt by primitive peoples. It expresses the same aversion to killing another human being that taboos on the savage homicide betray. After a Pima killed an Apache he had to fast for sixteen days, touching neither meat nor salt, nor looking at a fire blaze, nor speaking to a human being. Were he to touch his head or his face with his fingers, his hair would turn white and his face wrinkle. Unless the Natchez who had taken his first scalp abstained from eating flesh and from sleeping with his wife for six months, the soul of the

³ The italics are mine.

man he had killed would work his death by magic. For three nights after he had clubbed a human being to death the Fijian warrior had to sleep sitting up. In Central Australia the rest of a successful Arunta warrior is very broken. For nights he must lie awake listening to the cry of the little bird his fallen foe incarnates. Any failure to hear the cry would result in paralysis of right arm and shoulder. For a long time after his kill, a Monumbo warrior of New Guinea may touch no one. Were he to touch his wife or children, they would break out with sores. Among the Koita the homicide himself is endangered. He is supposed to grow thin and emaciated. Having been splashed with the blood of his victim, as the corpse rots, the slayer, they believe, wastes away.

The taboos growing out of this New Guinea belief as well as the other taboos on the victorious have been explained by the ethnologist as due to ghost fear. The homicide is subject to haunting by his victim, the simple-minded hold, and so the homicide must be exorcised or purified. However this may be, whatever reasons early man may have given himself, the beliefs and practises I have cited and many others analogous indicate, it seems to me, that very early man *felt* that the killing of other human beings was excessively repugnant;⁴ with death in any form he was reluctant to be implicated. Very likely the upset the implication through killing caused him induced in him a special kind of ghost fear. Among the primitive, fear of ghosts or of evil spirits generally accompanies emotional disturbance.

That the killing itself had to be provoked by fear, by great fear, also seems probable, and that aversion to it had to be overcome by co-operation, by the courage inspired by numbers, by gregarious assurances, by social mysticism.⁵ Holding then that "human nature" is not murderous, *i. e.*, men do not kill for the fun of killing, I suggest that war has been possible not because, according to the common view, men are naturally warlike, individually bellicose, but because they are naturally fearful and, above all, in their gregariousness highly mystical. Collective fears and uncritical gregarious impulses are thus the data the pacifist propagandist must consider. Expressions of combativeness or aggressiveness are not so much his concern⁶ as are expressions of cowardice and of mysticism.

⁴ Just as to-day feels the more conservative of the two sexes, and the sex more addicted to death taboos, *i. e.*, to mourning.

⁵ Sometimes by specific acts of magic. "When old enough to join the fighting men the Zulu lads were beaten with the leaves of the cocoa-nut palm during a dance and 'medicine' was given to cause them not to care for or have pity upon any one." (*Reports Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Islands of Torres Straits*, V., 299. Cambridge, 1904.)

⁶ At a recent meeting to organize a "League to Enforce Peace" ex-President Taft said: "So long as nations partake of the frailties of men who compose them, war is a possibility. . . ." And the speaker had here in mind, not individual fearfulness, I think, but individual bellicosity.